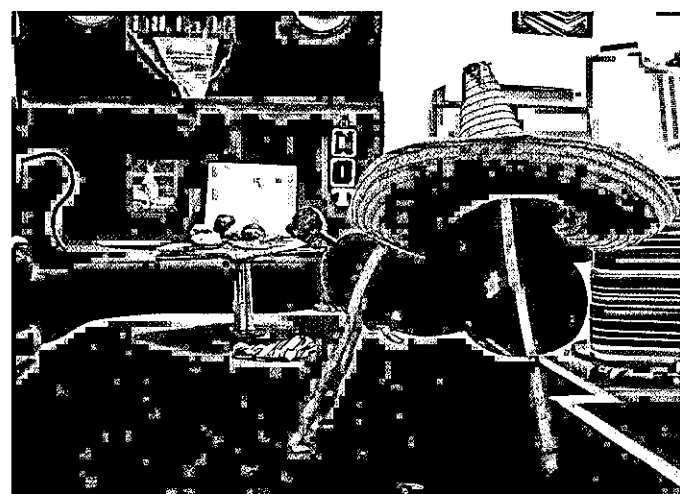
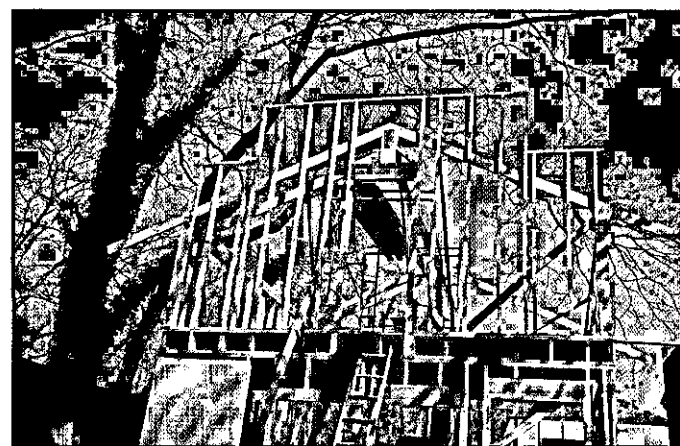




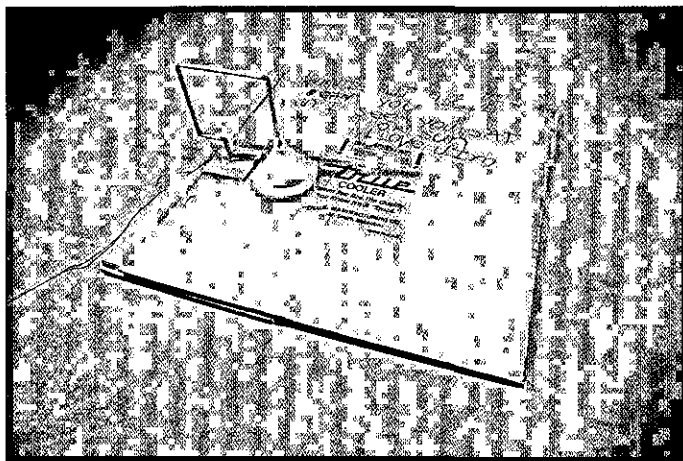
just that way
Rachel Hooper



From 1994 to 2000 Andy Coolquitt's life and work revolved around his expansive studio/artist commune/performance space/living sculpture/party place on the east side of Austin, where he continues to live, work, and host events. A wide national and international audience was introduced to his artwork in 2008 with the solo exhibition *ight* at Lisa Cooley on the Lower East Side of New York City. This exhibition was a watershed moment not only in Coolquitt's career but also for his work, which shifted from maximal, site-specific installations of collections of objects to refined arrangements that blend ideas of design, sculpture, and conceptual art.¹ This monograph and the accompanying exhibition at Blaffer Art Museum address the untold story of how Coolquitt got from there to here—from his early interest in furniture, architecture, performance, and found objects, through the creation and curation of his house, to his recent assemblages of reductive objects made from scavenged materials.

Even though Coolquitt's art has taken different forms at different times, this book and exhibition will show that his ideas and concerns have remained remarkably consistent and have deepened over the years. The exhibition brings his new works from New York to Texas for the first time, contextualizing them with key early works. It features prime examples of his stripes, lights, poles, pipes, and planks, and shows how they relate to themes of comfort, community, and the body.² This publication explores the range of strategies and concepts that define Coolquitt's practice, and visually documents the work on view as well as ephemeral site-specific projects that are no longer extant.

Synthesizing a presentation of Coolquitt's works has been a challenge, as his creations inherently resist classification, skewer pretension, and rebel against the standard formats used for checklists, outlines, and exhibition



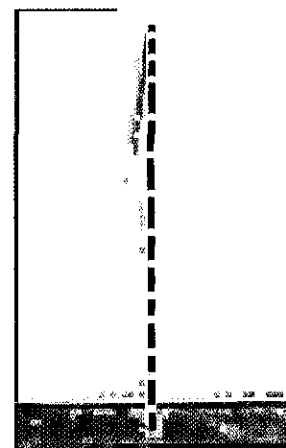
plans. A reflection of the artist's personality, his idiosyncratic work acknowledges the fraught negotiations that complicate individuality and freedom. The artist's understanding of the limitations of independence emerged from his struggles with his place in society—economically, ideologically, and geographically. Having chosen a path that diverges from the prescribed route for developing an artistic career, Coolquitt soon found that he could not work things out alone. He determined that dialogue and collaboration were essential to defining the meaning of his practice and became concerned primarily with where art fits into the social contract.

The moment where a relationship sparks is at the heart of Coolquitt's project, and he is invested in its often-foolish idealism. We engage with other people and ideas because we seek communal understanding, acceptance, and achievement, and will sacrifice—to variable degrees—our personal independence to those ends. For Coolquitt, our success in attaining the ideal community and perfect communication is not as interesting as where and why we fail along the way. The distance between persons—the gaps, gaffes, and miscommunications—is where autonomy and community are held in balance, forming fertile ground for artistic experimentation. In this context his cobbled-together, functional objects take on a powerful metaphorical meaning concerning where we are as a society: imperfectly pulling ourselves together to try to make things work.

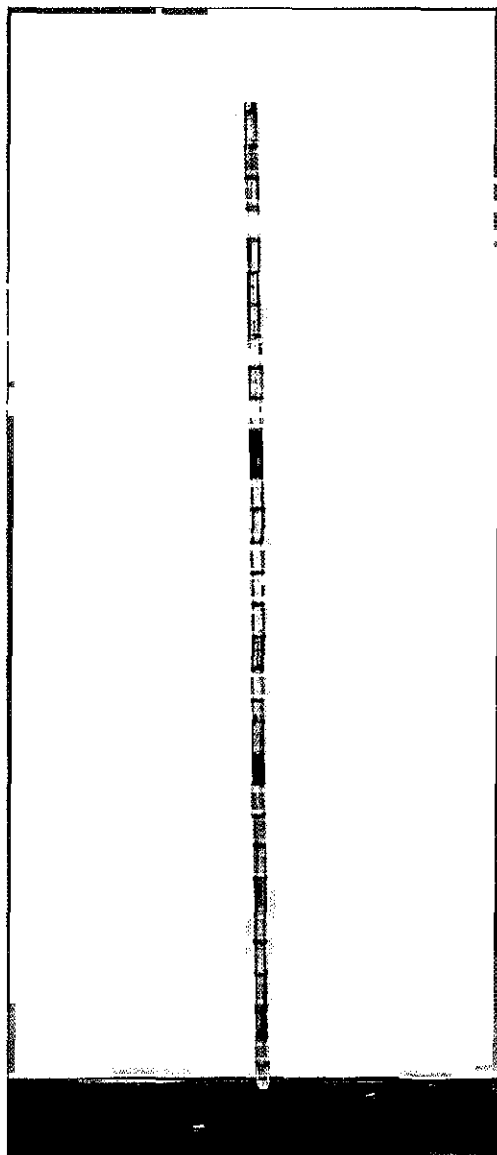
Coolquitt has a number of strategies for forging connections while claiming space for individuality. This is reflected in the arrangement of his recent installations. The works are gathered in groups, leaning on the wall or lounging on the floor like acquaintances, casually bridging the vertical plane of the wall normally reserved for paintings and the horizontal plane of the floor traditionally assigned to sculpture.³ Walking through one of his exhibitions like a guest at a party, one has the impetus to get to know the objects. Sometimes Coolquitt will provide comfortable seating to encourage visitors to sit back and relax, allowing connections to form between people and objects. It is easy to imagine picking up one of his pipes or poles and using it as a walking stick or ritualistic object, especially for those who catch the reference to performative antecedents such as Joseph Beuys's staff or the *barres* that the Polish-born André Cadere carried to Paris galleries.



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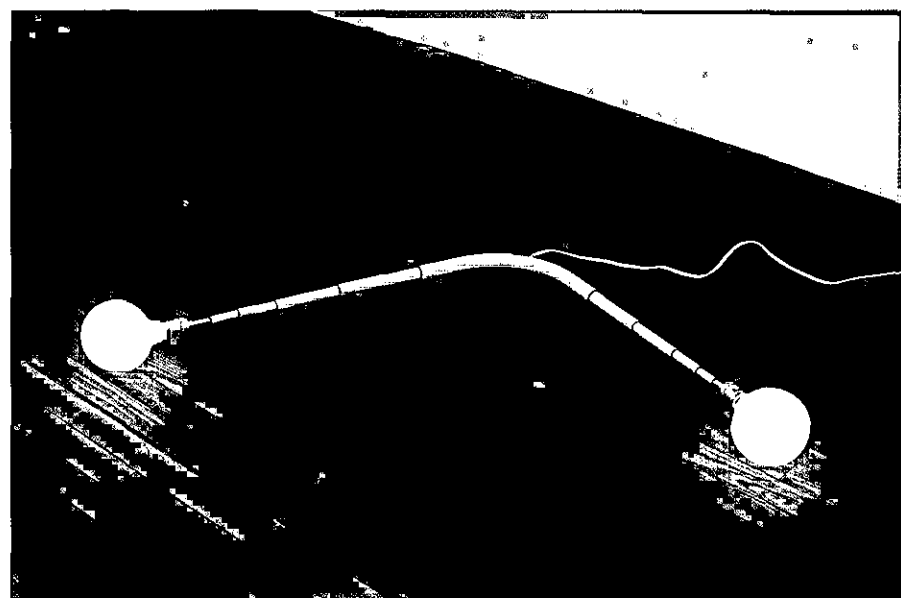


2.



Many of Coolquitt's recent works have an absurd function he describes as "prosthetic," including his *Endless Lighter* (2008), the prototype for an elongated lighter whose flame would last for days so your lighter would never run out at a party, or his pipe lamps, which could be used to light a room, but instead dimly illuminate patches of the ceiling or floor.⁴ The invention of these devices came from the artist's tinkering with materials through a creative process he calls "impersonation." When he is not sure where to start with a new idea, he asks himself how someone else might approach it and what perspective they might take. Coolquitt says that he learned this technique as a child, when he was enlisted to be the poster boy for a public-service campaign on the danger of fireworks. He continued acting and performing as a teenager, in high school musicals and various rock bands, and performance became a natural part of his practice as an artist.

One of Coolquitt's ongoing impersonations started in 1989 when he began his series of "openings," for which he collects cans flattened on the street, brings them back to his studio, pries them open, and attempts to restore them to their original shape. The impersonation is of "an old man who lives in a shack out in East Texas. he passes the time scurrying about his property, using handmade one-of-a-kind tools to open the cans up. he has been doing this for as long as i've known him. he's always got to be pryin them thangs open, a hammerin and a pryin. i told him he's crazy a hunerd times, but he don't listen to a thang i say."⁵ In Coolquitt's view, his performance as a "folk artist" who "redeems" cans challenges any habits of thought that may have become entrenched in his own mind. Specifically, this persona allows him to recapture the joy of making things without the weight of art history or critical theory.



Coolquitt has long struggled with the burden of history. While studying art history as an undergraduate at the University of Texas in Austin, Coolquitt found that the more he focused on history, the less compelled he was to maintain a studio practice.⁶ He eventually stopped making artwork altogether. The time away from art making served, unexpectedly, as a reset button that freed him to find inspiration outside a narrowly defined visual art realm. "Quitting" became a strategy he has used regularly to revitalize his artistic approach and renegotiate his place in society. When he graduated from UT in 1988, he joined the underground scene in Austin, where young punk rockers, avant-garde filmmakers, and other creative minds worked collectively to achieve radical creative ends, and this offered him an alternative to a lonely studio practice.⁷ With a reawakened determination to become an artist, Coolquitt moved to the West Coast in 1989 to study in the MFA program at the University of California, Los Angeles, with Paul McCarthy and Charles Ray, two artists immersed in issues of performance.

A solo exhibition of Coolquitt's work at the end of his first semester at UCLA marked a turning point. In *Devices for Living at Ease with Other Humans* (1989), he expressed for the first time many of the concepts that are central to his work to this day, including the idea that art could be prosthetic and serve as a means of communication between people. He incorporated salvaged materials into tables, lamps, and furniture of indeterminate function. A central element was an inverted wooden corbel that joined the wall to the floor like a seat, its scrolling curves sensuously strung with large plastic pearls lit by a small lamp attached to a freestanding four-by-four. In retrospect, Coolquitt relates his art-as-furniture to "the problem of 'salivating a million works of art' every time you look at a work of art, and trying to escape that baggage. i liked that you didn't really think about furniture that way, and it . . . worked its magic through your body (your ass)."⁸

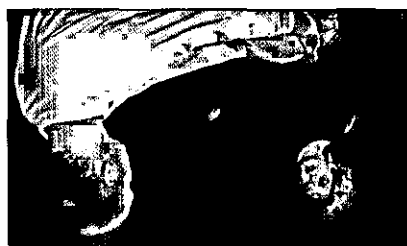
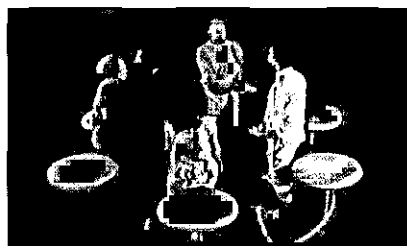
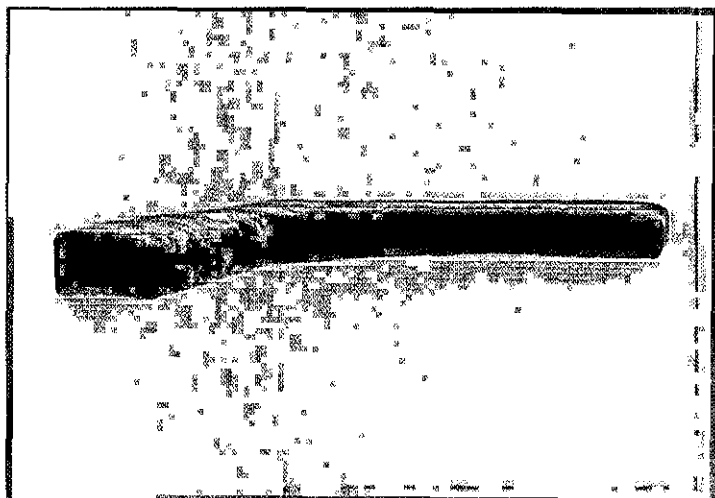


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This breakthrough prompted Coolquitt to apply himself to fully integrating art and life in the manner of McCarthy's teacher and mentor Allan Kaprow. To realize the "lifelike art" Kaprow describes in his 1983 essay "The Real Experiment," Coolquitt decided once again to abandon a studio practice. In 1990, he moved back to Austin to work at the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired, a group home and public school that educates children with multiple disabilities. As Coolquitt has written, "i had no idea how to deal with 'the social' in my work. i saw lots of people trying and failing miserably, and i went for the most direct path. to deal with 'the social,' do social work!"⁹ Social work met Kaprow's challenge to change "the overall meaning of art . . . from being an end to being a means, from holding out a promise of perfection in some other realm to demonstrating a way of living meaningfully in this one."¹⁰ But even as Coolquitt passionately committed himself to his work at the school, he never stopped thinking about sculptural concerns, and brought them to his observation of how the children he cared for moved through space and experienced the world through touch. Thinking about how an object might facilitate communication for the socially maladjusted, he built a fuzzy wall-mounted ledge that someone could lean their elbow on for support: "i thought of it as a kind of adaptive furniture object that would help 'retarded' people function. but i wasn't thinking of the 'retarded' kids, i was thinking of myself and how socially retarded i felt and how an object might help me relate to people in a more constructive way. i later thought of this object as 'a nice soft place for meeting people.'"¹¹ Although he did not think of the shelf as an art object at the time, it motivated him to make things again.

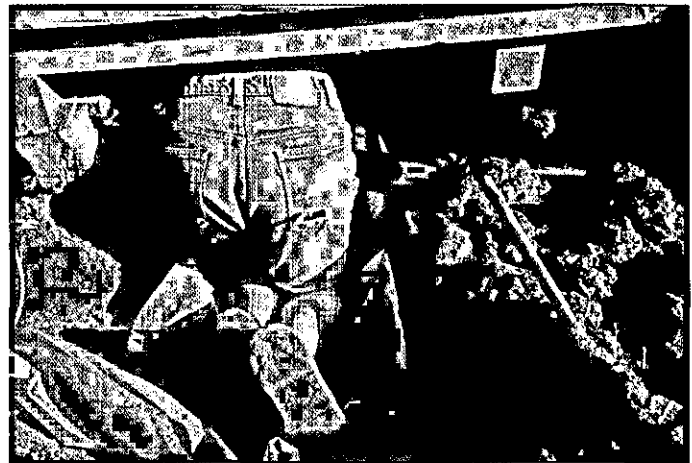
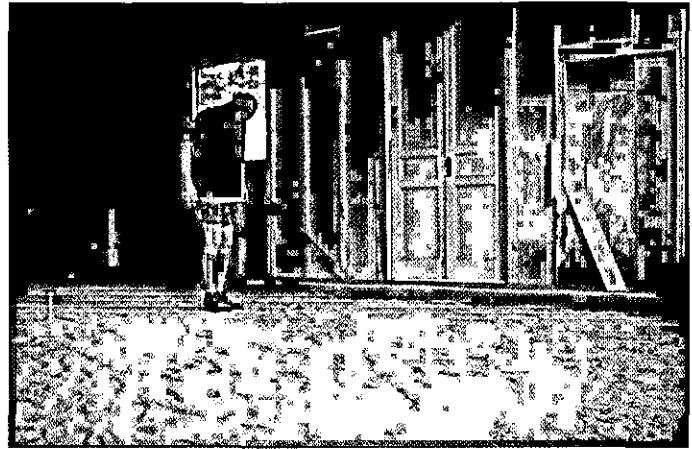
In 1993, Coolquitt returned to UT to enter the graduate program in studio art. He was interested in designing objects that would "facilitate, not manipulate" social connections.¹² An important model was the "adaptives" of contemporary Viennese artist Franz West—plaster-covered abstract shapes that people can pick up, put down, or play with. Coolquitt's 1993 installation *2001 Wet Shafts: Forced Intimacy Interaction*, made in his first semester at UT, similarly invited open-ended interaction, but with a satirical edge. A circle of interconnected round stools was installed near a set of monitors showing an absurd instructional video of a group of barefoot people in coordinating sweatsuits sitting on the stools and talking. The soundtrack was dubbed from a scene in *2001: A Space Odyssey* in which the character Dr. Andrei Smyslov talks to a group of other scientists, mixed with synthesizer background music and a woman's orgasmic moans. The artist's advisor, performance artist Linda Mary Montano, makes a cameo appearance as (the male) Dr. Smyslov, and Coolquitt plays the role of the chairman of the National Council of Aeronautics, Dr. Heywood Floyd.¹³

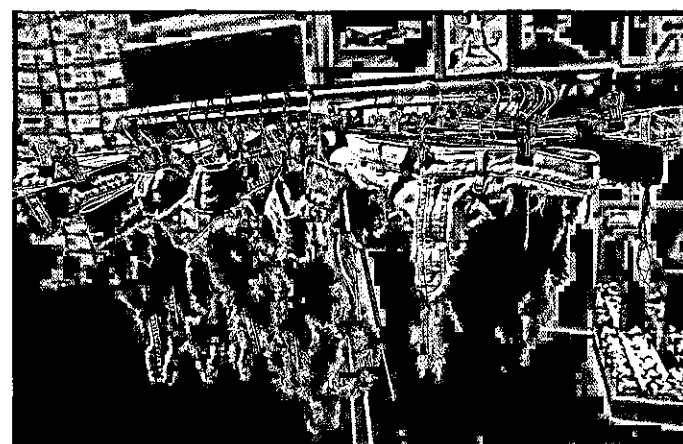
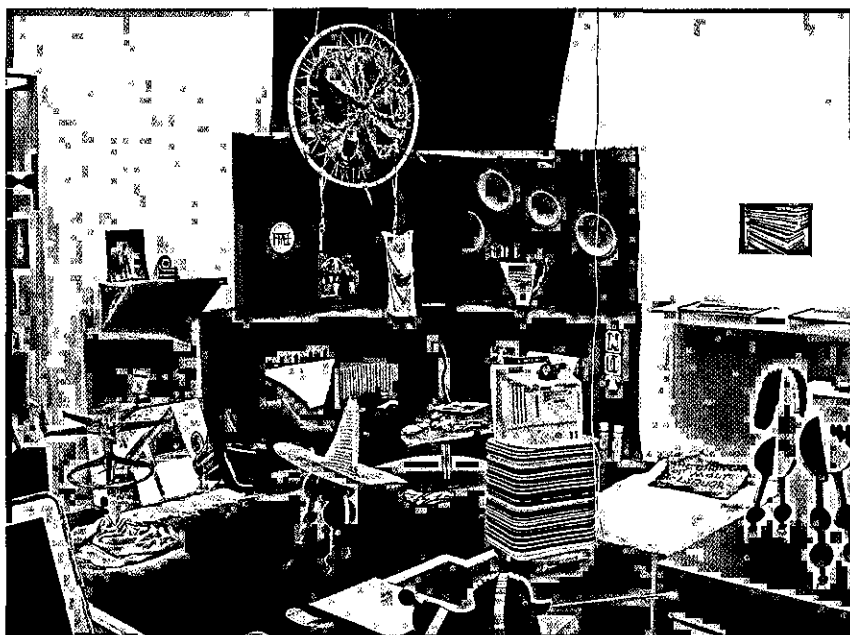


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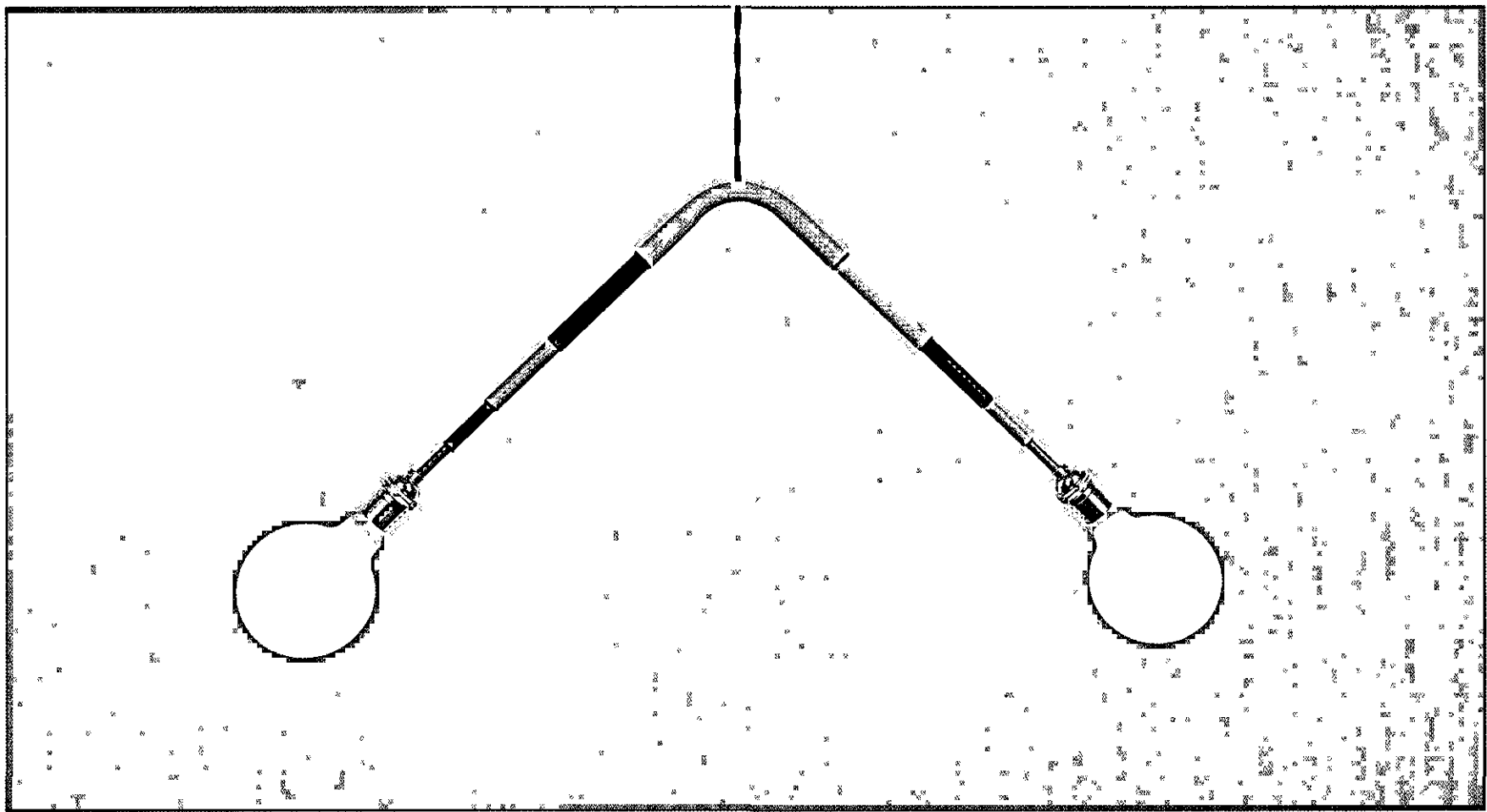
The following year, Coolquitt began a project that would be the center of his life for the next decade. For his MFA thesis project "a house," he bought a small bungalow occupying an expansive quadruple lot in East Austin. Over the years, the house was transformed to become part of a complex of buildings that provided additional living quarters, a communal kitchen, a greenhouse, and studio space. Coolquitt framed the act of building the house as art: constructing a wall was a performance, digging plumbing lines an earthwork.¹⁴ Using mostly reclaimed materials, he impersonated carpenters, electricians, and anyone else needed for construction.¹⁵ Friends and artists, in particular the sculptor and musician Faith Gay, helped expand the compound to become a semi-public space for large parties, film screenings, and performances.

As both a studio and a work of art, the house combined what Jean Baudrillard called the ethic of labor and the aesthetic of play.¹⁶ Inspired by models such as Ben Vautier's record store *Magazin* in Nice and Jefferson Davis McKissack's facility *The Orange Show* in Houston, Coolquitt's house provided an environment for the holistic integration of life and art, making him curator and director of a self-sustaining alternative institution. The house still serves as a base of operations for the itinerant artist, who lives for stretches of time in places such as New York or Milan. Artists who have lived at the house at one time or another, such as Dave Bryant, Hana Hillerova, and Ben Lynch, have all left their mark, and important events in Austin's cultural scene have been launched there, including the salon-style *Think-N-Drink* and *Mi Casa Es Su Teatro*, now part of the annual fringe theater festival *FronteraFest*.



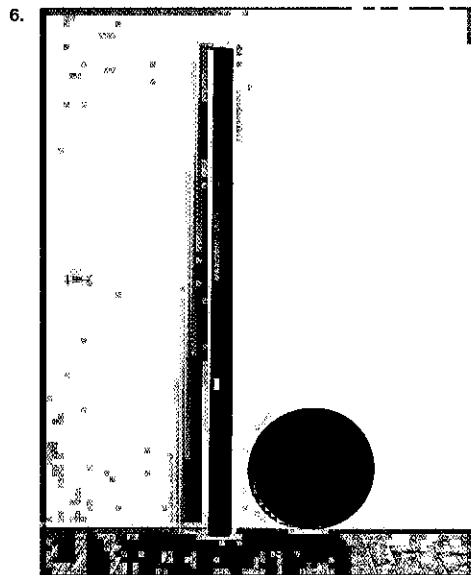


During this period—1994 to 1999—Coolquitt rejected traditional artistic practice for the third time and refused to exhibit his work in commercial galleries. When he did bring his work out of the house for public display in late 2000, his installations had radically changed. His presentations in artist-run spaces such as Fresh Up Club in Austin, Clocktower Art Space in Brooklyn, Savage Art Resources in Portland, and OUTPOST in Norwich (United Kingdom) were what the artist calls “studio exhibitions,” in which the galleries became living, working studios that replicated the artist’s open studio at the house. He filled the spaces with objects he collected from local streets and would hang out making things and conversing with visitors. By the early 2000s, Coolquitt was voraciously collecting all sorts of materials to work with—polka dot shirts, fabric with bright, striped patterns (he says they “massage the eyes”), plastic lighters, washing-machine agitators, ceramic and wooden hands flipping the bird (his “bird” collection), blue-jean thongs, stools made from juice cans, broom handles, metal tubes, pig figurines, high-modernist furniture, and colored straws. His work was an explosion of tacky DayGlo, metallic, and pastel colors on discarded, out-of-fashion, redeemed materials.¹⁷



In 2007, Coolquitt turned to a more reductive means of filling the visual field with the invention of his “pipe lights.” The idea for the pipe lights came to Coolquitt while he was manipulating thin metal tubes he took from shopping carts, strollers, and mop handles and brought to his New York studio. While experimenting with balancing sections of pieced-together tube on top of one another, he made a connection with the lamps he was building as a side business. As he recalls: “it was interesting because the balancing point was never exactly at the center point because of the different thicknesses and weights of the pipes. the idea of using this balancing point as a hanging point came naturally and since i had been constructing light fixtures of all kinds in the studio at this time, it was natural to hang the pipes with electrical wire and put sockets at each end. so that’s how the first [pipe light] came about.”¹⁸

These lanky lamps have a poignant, almost pathetic elegance. As most of them are hollow, they evoke the conveyance of energy—like oil pipes, blood vessels, or telephone cables. As conceptually, emotionally, and visually resonant sculptural objects, lightbulbs inspired earlier artists such as Jasper Johns, Robert Morris, Dan Flavin, and Michelangelo Pistoletto.¹⁹ Being a particle and a wave, energy and a thing, light naturally functions as a metaphor for liminal experience and, for Félix González-Torres, Tony Feher, and Coolquitt, empathy and mortality as well.²⁰ Similar to emotional connections such as love or friendship, illumination can be warm, sustained, or recurring. The pipe lights are endowed with what the artist calls the “pressurized energy” of imaginative associations, which connect the work to, say, the enlivened reductive forms of modernists such as Blinky Palermo, with his asymmetrically balanced spatial compositions.



6. Blinky Palermo, *Blaue Scheibe und Stab*, 1968.

Unlike his modernist heroes, however, Coolquitt uses salvaged materials that retain a gritty patina.²¹ When he joins found materials together to become something else, he does little to alter their dented, scratched, or dirty surfaces. They maintain a visual continuity with their origins and imply a chain of production that runs from their original manufacture, through their use and disposal by unknown individuals, to their ultimate repurposing by Coolquitt.

The process of finding objects at secondhand stores, in dumpsters, and along street curbs is itself a creative act for Coolquitt. Scavenging also gets the artist out of his studio to drift through the streets on a *derive*, like that described by Guy Debord. Coolquitt's wanderings are aimless, yet highly attuned to how the cityscape affects him; he lets what he finds guide his actions.

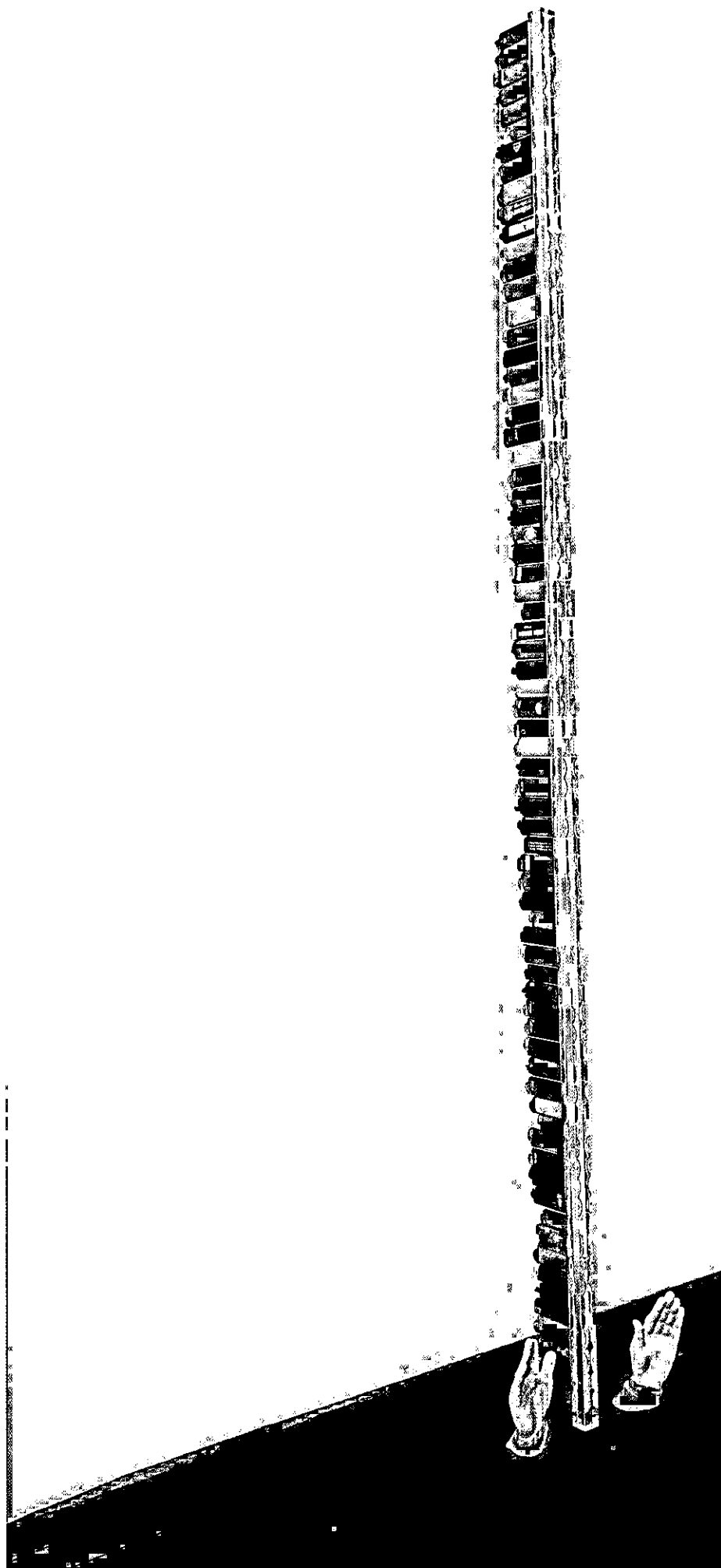
Sometimes the amassing of his collections is enough, and he is not moved to make them into art. When he is out walking or riding his bike, he may come upon a pile of trash that looks promising, and stop to examine it. Occasionally, what he finds will possess a unique quality, and Coolquitt will photograph the pile as is. Other times, he will break apart what he finds to see if any pieces might be useful, or attempt to construct an artwork right there on the street. If the piece fails, he throws it back in the pile; if it shows

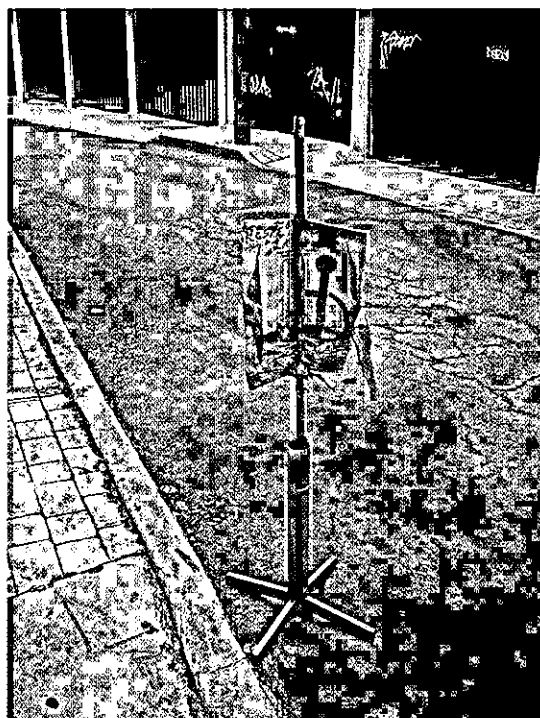
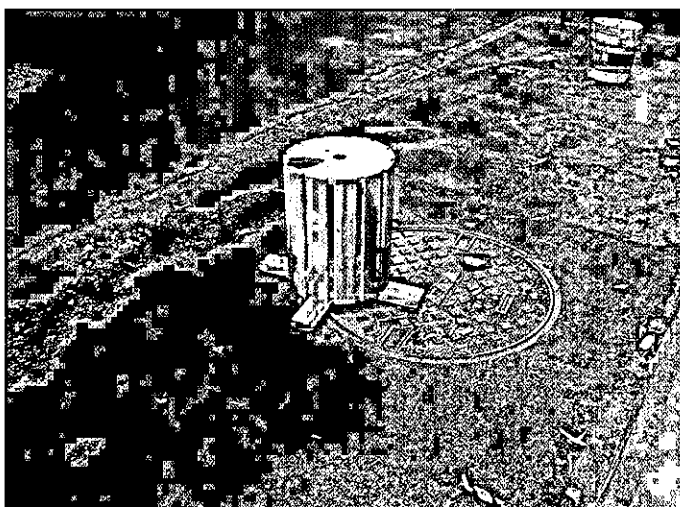
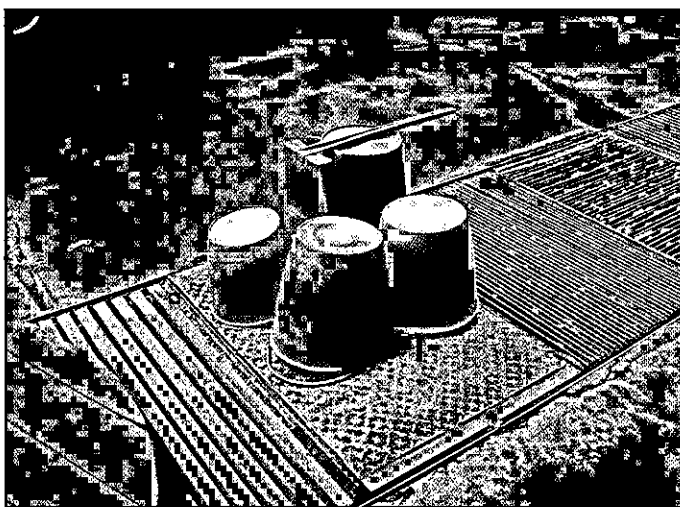
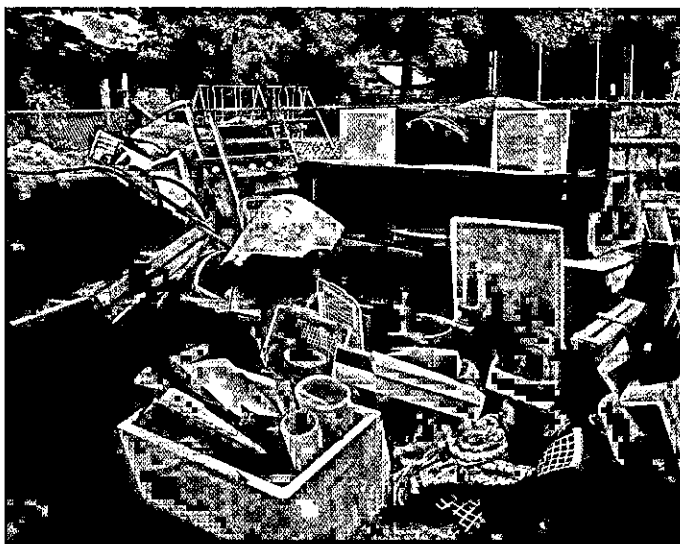
promise, he takes it back to his studio.

When he finds discarded assemblages that someone else has made (usually for pragmatic purposes), he keeps them for inspiration. Since the late 1990s, he has actively sought out what he calls "crack sites"—the marginalized areas where people gather to smoke crack cocaine—first as a source of plastic lighters for his collection, and

then for what makes them interesting as social spaces. The artist photographs these and other places that evidence autodidactic or impromptu design to form a sort of sketchbook for his own assemblages of found materials.

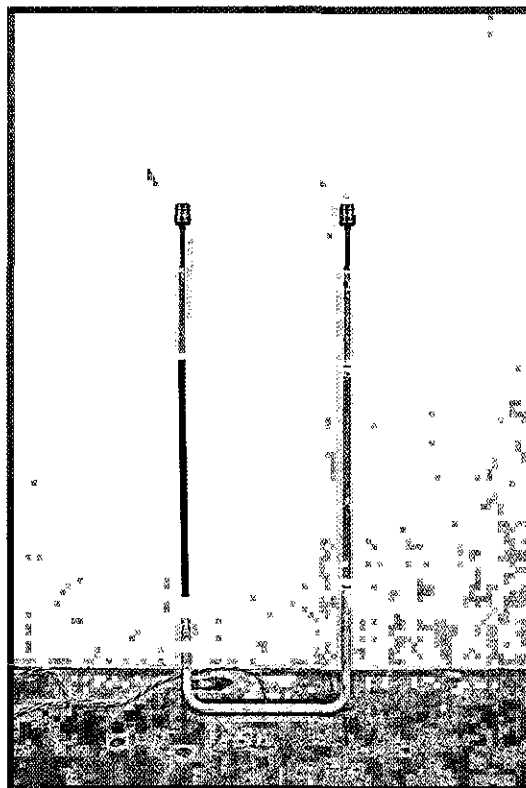
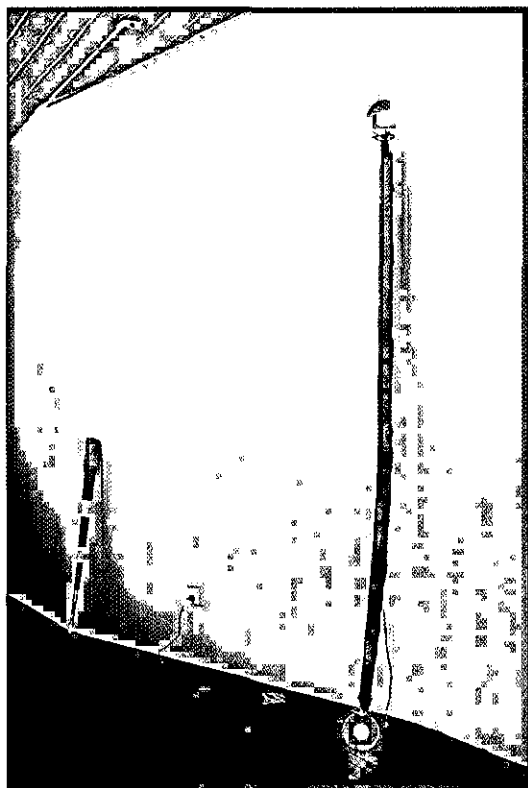
One recent work made from his vast collection of lighters is *BBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBOBBBBB
BBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBB* (2008). The title of the work corresponds to the colors of its components: it has one "B" for each blue lighter and one "O" for the single orange lighter. As an abbreviated notation, the title conceals and reveals nothing upfront, and the repetition of round letters gives the appearance of an abstract drawing of curved lines. The word takes time to write out, and if you attempt to read it aloud, you sound like an idiot (though if you ask the artist, he will tell you that you can just call it Bob). As with many of Coolquitt's titles, the direct translation of the artwork into written language both amplifies the straightforward appearance of the object and adds a layer of confusion. The title embodies the shortcomings of written communication, which is cumbersome and slow in comparison with direct experience or the oral exchange of ideas, which can be nonetheless awkward and messy.





In his recent exhibitions, artworks such as “Bob” are interspersed with what the artist calls “somebody-mades” and “in-between objects.” Somebody-mades, a play on the historical avant-garde’s “readymades,” are found assemblages that were often originally put together by someone for a practical purpose, such as a bundle of wooden rods cut and duct-taped by a building’s super to discard in the trash, or a worn broom whose handle has been repaired by someone jamming a twig into the broken pipe. In-between objects are found objects that serve as a source for the artist but have not yet become artworks in and of themselves. By arranging somebody-mades, in-between objects, and finished artworks together in an exhibition, Coolquitt gives an insight into his process: one can see how he has scavenged materials, what characteristics he likes to find in objects (such as linearity, bright colors, and unintentionally aesthetic craftsmanship), and how his mind pieces it all together.

Coolquitt’s arrangements evoke a humanism beyond style. Even without knowing the backstory of his sculptures and their relationship to each other, one senses that they come from a place of authentic engagement. In fashioning prosthetics, conducting impersonations, “quitting” art, gathering materials from the streets, and merging art with life, Coolquitt opens his practice up to all sorts of experiences and condenses ideas into elegant objects that start rather than close conversations. His objects allow for ongoing questioning and investigation that may lead to understandings that, for all of their surprise and ambiguity, are real and present.²² His work thus inspires a hope that we can somehow accept our idiosyncrasies and misunderstandings. For only by respecting individual autonomy can we build a community that embraces freedom and nurtures us holistically.



Notes

This essay's title is a play on the title of Coolquitt's work *jsut* (2007).

1. Coolquitt's exhibition at Lisa Cooley opened within a month of the financial meltdown of September 2008. Panic beset investors, art collectors included. The artist responded with *vipsx* and *ecgox* (both 2008), named after the ticker symbols for mutual funds. Two plastic hands flip the bird at either end of a vertical pole in a you-get-screwed-either-way commentary. *21st century aggressive carpet growth* (2008) is another tongue-in-cheek comparison of bull markets to a dirty carpet or cancerous tumor. Coolquitt studied macroeconomics as an undergraduate at the University of Texas during the art market boom of the 1980s, and the parallels between financial instruments, such as derivatives, and the art market have long fascinated him. Both bestow value on essentially worthless materials, rely on fickle perceptions, and trade on the expected escalation of future prices. Financial graphs for charting rising and declining value appeal to him formally as well; he satirizes their resemblance to pours of paint in *Morris Louis Value Index* (2002) and *Good Graph* (2003), where hundreds of colored lighters create ascending lines as if charting a gradual increase of multiple variables.

2. The body infuses Coolquitt's work: hands, fingers, and dildoes are incorporated into sculptures; fingerprints, abrasions, and fixes with tape and welds show where bodies—the artist's and others'—have made their mark on found materials. Poles and pipe lights relate to the size and verticality of standing persons, prompting some critics to see a connection with Alberto Giacometti's walking figures (see Walter Robinson, "San Francisco Sketchy," *artnet Magazine*, March 30, 2010, <http://www.artnet.com/magazine/reviews/robinson/the-legion-of-honor3-30-10.asp>).

3. "Lean" is also a term in Texas hip-hop slang, referring to a mixture of cough syrup and soda popularized in the mid-1990s and also known as purple drank or Texas tea. The concoction is so intoxicating that those under its influence can only lean, slowed down like the "chopped and screwed" rap music purportedly inspired by it. Coolquitt pays tribute to this music in his sculpture *light* (2008), which plays on the idea of rightness and uprightness in the manner of his acknowledged influence, the artist John McCracken.

4. Coolquitt's prosthetic objects reflect a view of art as an act of caring, healing, or therapy; see his *A nice soft place for meeting people* (2010; discussed on page 22). Coolquitt has also shown an interest in Allan Kaprow's

essay "The Real Experiment," which describes the purpose of "lifelike" art as similar to that of psychology and theology, in that they all try "to make sense out of the countless disconnected, and sometimes very dangerous, pieces of our culture and to rediscover the whole." Lifelike art, in which nothing is separate, is a training in letting go of the separate self." Allan Kaprow, "The Real Experiment" (1983), *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelly (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 216–217.

5. Andy Coolquitt, unpublished notes, n.d. Editor's note: For the purposes of this publication, we retain the artist's use of the lowercase and other stylistic preferences.

6. The focus of Coolquitt's art-historical studies was early medieval art, in particular intimate spiritual talismans of unknown purpose.

7. For more on this formative time in Coolquitt's life, see his statement in a Domy Books press release, July 19, 2010, <http://www.domybooks.com/cgi-bin/dada/mail.cgi/archive/DomyPress/20100719151033/>.

8. Andy Coolquitt, unpublished notes, n.d. ("Salivating a million works of art" refers to Kaprow, "Real Experiment," 203.)

9. Ibid.

10. Kaprow, "Real Experiment," 218.

11. Andy Coolquitt, unpublished notes, n.d.

12. Rachel Koper, "The Site Is the Studio: Andy Coolquitt Builds a Show from Scratch in the Fresh Up Club," *Austin Chronicle*, August 6, 2004, <http://www.austinchronicle.com/grobase/issue/story?oid=oid%3A223070>.

13. For more on 2001 *Wet Shafts: Forced Intimacy Interaction*, see Michael Bilsborough, "Face to Space," *Artist of the Month Club*, December 30, 2010, <http://theartistofthemonthclub.wordpress.com/2010/12/30/face-to-space/>.

14. For more on the house, see Kelly Baum, "Andy Coolquitt's House," *Art Lies: A Contemporary Art Quarterly*, no. 38 (Spring 2003): 65.

15. Coolquitt's use of found materials resembles the contemporary bricolage that Anna Dezeuze calls "a studio practice for artists revisiting the failed utopias of past avant-garde movements" in her article "Assemblage, Bricolage, and the Practice of Everyday life," *Art Journal* 67, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 34. I see Coolquitt as returning specifically to the work of 1960s assemblage artists such as Arman, Louise Nevelson, and Ed Kienholz.

16. Jean Baudrillard used these terms to describe a Marxist dialectic in his "The Mirror of Production" (1973), reprinted in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 109.

17. Coolquitt would sometimes use brightly colored polka-dot and striped patterns as tongue-in-cheek references to geometric abstraction. See Matthew Higgs's "20 questions," page 129.

18. Andy Coolquitt, unpublished notes, n.d.

19. Johns, whose first sculpture was of a lightbulb (*Light Bulb I*, 1958), owns a work by Morris, *Metered Bulb* (1963), that tracks the electricity usage of an attached bulb. Flavin made unparalleled use of light fixtures and fluorescent bulbs to create atmospheric and optical effects in architectural spaces. Along with other artists in the mid-1960s, Pistoletto was more interested in using light as an extension of painting, as in his curtain of lightbulbs hanging from the wall (*Quadro di fili elettrici-Tenda di lampadine*, 1967).

20. In the 1990s González-Torres, in works such as *Untitled (Lovers-Paris)* (1993), and Feher, in works such as *Untitled (1999)* (1999), responded to the AIDS crisis through the iconography of lightbulbs.

21. In this respect, Coolquitt's work references abstract art less than the television show *The Wire*, which ran on HBO from 2002 to 2008. Created by MacArthur Foundation "genius" David Simon, the series is known for its realistic depiction of the harsh realities of inner-city Baltimore, its street-corner dialogue, and its nuanced, conflicted characters. A central theme is the persistence of individuals in the face of insurmountable corruption and betrayal by powerful public institutions such as law enforcement, the educational system, and the media. In 2009, after the show went off the air, Coolquitt started making works as a tribute to the show's characters. *Oink Oink* (2009) has two tall, thin lamps with round lightbulbs at both ends leaning against a board. The bulbs at the top of the lamps just barely touch, and their weight is supported by a deep purple, irregularly shaped board that has pictures of the women characters hanging down from it on a wire. Coolquitt's inspiration for the piece was the relationship between Detective Kima Greggs and her girlfriend Cheryl. *Omar's Last Pack* (2009) includes a bag of Newport cigarettes, immediately recognizable to fans of the show as the cigarettes that Omar was buying when he was shot in the head and died in Season 5.

22. For more on the contemporary interest in "things" of artists, critics, and theorists, see Dieter Roelstraete, "Art as Object Attachment: Thoughts on Thingness," in *When Things Cast No Shadow: 5th Berlin Biennial for Contemporary Art*, exhibition catalogue (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2008), 444.